

Rules of the Game

All About Spell-Like Abilities (Part One)

By Skip Williams



The grinning demon vanishes with a smirk and a mocking bow, the coy dryad bewitches the woodsman with no more than a fetching look, the trio of loathsome hags turns the hero into a toad with naught but a derisive cackle. That's three examples of spell-like abilities in action. What are spell-like abilities? Why are they called that? How do they work? Read on to find the answers these questions and to a few others that tend to pop up in connection with spell-like abilities.

What Is a Spell-Like Ability?

The term "spell-like ability" has been part of the **D&D** game for many years, and it still retains its essential meaning: A spell-like ability is a magical trick that works exactly like a spell of the same name. How does a dryad's *charm person* spell-like ability work? Just like a *charm person* spell.

Spell-like abilities first arrived in the game along with magically accomplished creatures such as demons. They served as handy shortcuts for designers trying to give such creatures an appropriate amount of magical punch without getting too long-winded. Earlier versions of the game didn't have much to say about spell-like abilities. When a creature had them, you got a list of the spell names the creature could duplicate and usually some information about how often the creature could use each ability.

In the current version of the **D&D** game, the term "spell-like ability" has taken on a little more meaning. It refers to a broad category of magical abilities that work more or less like spells, as noted below. Most of the details in the next two sections come from the discussion of spell-like abilities in Chapter 10 of the *Player's Handbook* and in the *Monster Manual* glossary.

Similarities Between Spells and Spell-Like Abilities

A spell-like ability is like a spell in the following ways:

- Using a spell-like ability is a standard action that provokes an attack of opportunity. Sometimes using a spell-like ability can be a free action or a full-round action, or it can have an even longer activation time. However, it's a standard action unless the ability description specifically says otherwise. A creature using a spell-like ability can use all the tricks that a spellcaster can use to avoid that nasty attack of opportunity. The creature can take a 5-foot step before using the ability (so as to get out of a threatened area). The creature also can make a Concentration check to use the ability defensively.
- A spell-like ability can be disrupted. Anything that could disrupt a spellcaster's concentration and ruin a spell can do the same thing to a spell-like ability. (See the section on disrupting spell-like abilities, below.)

- A spell-like ability is subject to the effects of antimagic. An *antimagic field* or a beholder's antimagic ray suppresses a spell-like ability so that it has no effect. This suppression does not dispel the ability, however, so if the spell-like ability's duration outlasts the antimagic effect, the spell-like ability resumes functioning when the antimagic effect goes away. An antimagic effect also blocks line of effect (see Chapter 10 in the *Player's Handbook*) for any magical ability, though a creature always has line of effect to itself. So a creature with a spell-like ability could use the ability on itself, even in an *antimagic field*. The magic still would be suppressed while the creature remains inside the antimagic effect, and the creature would gain no benefit from the ability until it left the area of antimagic. Time spent inside the antimagic effect still counts against the magic's duration, however.
- A spell-like ability can be dispelled. All the usual limitations of dispel effects apply to dispels used against spell-like abilities. For example, a spell-like ability with an instantaneous duration cannot be dispelled, and the dispel user must make a successful caster level check to dispel any spell-like ability with a longer duration.
- A spell-like ability has a caster level. The description of the creature will give its caster level for its spell-like abilities (which, among other things, determines the DC for the caster level check to dispel the ability). If no caster level is given, its caster level is equal to its Hit Dice. In many cases, however, a creature's caster level for spell-like abilities is not the same as its Hit Dice, and it might not be the same for all its spell-like abilities. Likewise, if the creature actually can cast spells, its caster level for its spells might be different than its caster level for spell-like abilities; check the creature's description to be sure. Some spell-like abilities duplicate spells that are not subject to dispelling; if so, the spell-like ability also is not subject to dispelling.
- A spell-like ability is subject to spell resistance. The creature using the spell-like ability must make a caster level check to overcome the subject's spell resistance, using its caster level for the spell-like ability in question. Some spell-like abilities duplicate spells that are not subject to spell resistance. If so, the spell-like ability also is not subject to spell resistance.
- A save DC for a spell-like ability is calculated the same way a save DC for a spell is calculated. The save DC for a spell-like ability (unless its description specifically says otherwise) is: $10 + \text{the level of the spell the ability duplicates} + \text{the user's Charisma modifier}$. The user's Charisma modifier affects the ability's save DC no matter what spell the ability duplicates.

Coming in Part Two of All About Spell-Like Abilities

Skip covers differences between spells and spell-like abilities, and the options you have for disrupting spell-like abilities.

About the Author

Skip Williams keeps busy with freelance projects for several different game companies and has been the Sage of *Dragon Magazine* since 1986. Skip is a co-designer of the **D&D** 3rd Edition game and the chief architect of the *Monster Manual*. When not devising swift and cruel deaths for player characters, Skip putters in his kitchen or garden (his borscht gets rave reviews).

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